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Preliminary Thoughts

It is easy to treat this text non- or a-historically, preaching a generalized sermon about the word of God and its power, especially in verses 10–11. Such a sermon would not be unorthodox, but it would not be *textual*. These four verses, as all pericopes, are situated in a context, first literarily/textually, and then historically. The power of the word of God accomplishing his ends, including final salvation, is, in the first instance, a message to Isaiah's hearers and readers. From that context they can be brought to bear on us and on our contemporary context.

Introduction

Chapter 55 of Isaiah concludes the section comprising chapters 40–55. What started with a command to comfort Yahweh's people in exile (40:1) now concludes with an invitation to come to a great feast provided by Yahweh (55:1), and a promise that they will be beneficiaries of an everlasting covenant (55:3) that will be sought by the Gentiles (55:5). With these verses Isaiah addresses those in Israel's future who will be returning

from Babylon to the promised land, with his contemporaries, of course, “overhearing” his words, as it were. Isaiah 55:6–9 may be placed within the context of these prior five verses as well, but this section might also have as its focus Isaiah’s time, the eighth century, with a plea to the people to abandon the ways that will lead to exile. This may well explain verses 8–9, which could be referring to Yahweh’s mysterious plan to take his people into exile and then bring them back again. After these nine verses, we find our text, which brings chapter 55, as well as the entire section 40–55, of Isaiah to a close.

Commentary

Verses 55:10–11: These verses may have as their focus Isaiah’s eighth century BC setting, or they may be ambiguous in their time frame, speaking (also) directly to the exiles centuries later (cf. the discussion in the Introduction, above). In either case, God’s word is a vital and life-giving force. It creates. It is a word of promise that is always effective. Given the prior context of Isaiah 52:13–53:12, that word centers in the work of Yahweh’s Servant, but it carries that work of redemption to effective completion with a new and lasting covenant (cf. 55:3). These verses bear an interesting relationship to Mark’s gospel and its emphasis. Mark invites his hearers/readers to trust the word of Jesus, which always comes true (see the passion predictions in 8:31, 9:31; 10:33–34; and especially 16:7: “He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him, *just as he told you* [cf. Mk 14:28]). These promises of our Lord are effective because they are of a piece with the promises of Yahweh in Isaiah—indeed, the word of the same God, working in the same way, for the same purposes.

Verses 55:12–13: Here the focus seems to be on the future exiles, though Isaiah’s contemporaries could be in view, as well. Regardless of what they suffer, including exile and deportation, nothing will be the last word except the triumph of the plan of Yahweh. There will be restoration. Again, we see NT fulfillment, but that in a complex way. Ultimately, the fulfillment of these verses occurs at the Parousia, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth (Rv 21:1), when what is mortal puts on immortality (1 Cor 15:53–54). But the fulfillment (also) occurred *proleptically*—ahead of time, in history—in the ministry of Jesus Christ. As our Lord fed the 5000—when people came without money to be fed (cf. Is 55:1)—it was in a desert place (Mk 6:35), but one in which young green grass was blooming (Mk 6:39)! At this miraculous feeding, the full restoration of God’s creation was anticipated, even as it was in Jesus’s miraculous healings (e.g., Mk 7:31–37) and in his calming of unruly nature (e.g., Mk 4:39–41).

Sermon: “From Promise to Triumph”

Introduction: It is not hard to believe and to carry on when things are going well, but when God’s saving action is not apparent and completely obvious, things get much more difficult.

1. Carrying on with difficulty was the case with Israel, both before the exile to Babylon and during that exile. Things were, indeed, bleak. But God promised through Isaiah an eternal covenant and eternal benefits. It would not

ever be apparent how everything would work out, but Israel could trust God's word of promise to bring them final triumph on the basis of an everlasting covenant founded upon the work of his Servant.

2. The people of Jesus's time were in an almost identical situation—under the oppression of Rome, with no apparent victory of God's gracious reign and rule. But, in Jesus's actions in his ministry, God's word of promise through Isaiah came to fruition in a preliminary way, and the word of promise of a new covenant (Is 55:3) came to fulfillment in an even more complete way through the new covenant in his blood (Lk 22:20). And all of this as a token of the full redemption of this people at his second coming.
3. These verses speak to us today. We stand in relation to our Lord's second coming as the people of Israel did to Yahweh's promise of return from exile and to the promise of a new covenant in the Servant, Jesus. Just like them we wait; we wait for the completion of the promise in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, what was true for them is true for us, as well: God's word is powerful, creative, and trustworthy. It can never fail. You can trust it with your life. We will surely come into possession of the promised inheritance of a new creation, as the sons and daughters of the King.